

CORRESPONDENCE

Between Sir Robert Borden and Sir Wilfrid Laurier respecting proposals for the extension of the term of Parliament.

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NOVEMBER 3, 1915, to JANUARY 3, 1917

OTTAWA, ONT., November 3, 1915.

DEAR SIR WILFRED LAURIER,—I beg to put in writing as requested by you at our interview on the 2nd inst., the proposals which I made at our interview on the 14th October last. They are as follows:—

1. That the term of the present Parliament of Canada, which expires on the 7th of October, 1916, shall be extended until one year after the conclusion of peace.

2. That there shall be no general election during the war; and that after the conclusion of peace a reasonable period shall be allowed in order that the Canadian forces now serving overseas may have the opportunity of first returning to their homes.

3. That during the interval, by-elections shall not be contested and that each party shall retain the seats which it now holds.

4. That in Parliament, and as far as possible in the public press, party warfare shall be suspended and the united efforts of both parties directed toward the best means of assisting to bring the war to a successful conclusion.

At our interview on the 14th October you appeared to have some hesitation about extending the life of Parliament until after the conclusion of the war, as the period thus fixed would be indefinite. If you regard that consideration as a serious one I am prepared, in lieu of proposal number one, to agree that the life of the present Parliament shall be extended for the period of one year, leaving for future consideration and discussion the necessity, if any, of further extension in order to avoid an election during the war.

Yours faithfully,

R. L. BORDEN.

The Right Honourable,

Sir WILFRID LAURIER, P.C., G.C.M.G., etc.,
House of Commons, Ottawa, Ont.

Confidential.

OTTAWA, November 8, 1915.

MY DEAR BORDEN,—In answer to yours of the 3rd I beg to observe:—

I persist in the opinion verbally expressed to you that the proposal to extend the term of the present Parliament until one year after the conclusion of peace would be absolutely objectionable for want of definiteness. I add that your subsidiary proposal that the life of the existing Parliament be extended for the period of one year, as set forth in the last paragraph of your letter, is a fair basis for consideration and acceptance.

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I must, however, further observe that before any undertaking can be reached I should be informed of the extent and nature of your legislative programme; I would expect to know if you intended to confine such programme exclusively to war measures, or if you propose to introduce measures of general policy. In particular, I would like to be exactly informed as to your railway policy.

In our recent conversations, I understood that owing to the present financial situation, the Grand Trunk Pacific and the Canadian Northern might require some legislation. Full information, both as to the character of the legislation required and as to the proposed action of the Government is rendered necessary by the very importance of the matter involved.

I also call your attention to the fact that according to persistent press reports the Minister of Railways lately visited and inspected a line of railway on the Lower St. Lawrence with the view of either purchasing or assisting it. It would be equally imperative to be informed of the exact policy of the Government as to this concern.

With regard to the other matters mentioned in your letter, they can be reserved for adjustment when those above set forth have been disposed of.

I can, however, at once declare in respect of the by-election, that for such vacancies as were caused by death your suggestion is entirely acceptable, but as to those which were caused by resignations, I could not now make any agreement.

I desire to add that whilst it is quite proper that the correspondence which is now going on between us should be confidential, yet when completed it may at the proper time be made public.

Yours very sincerely,

WILFRID LAURIER.

The Right Honourable Sir ROBERT BORDEN, P.C., G.C.M.G.,
Prime Minister's Office,
Ottawa.

OTTAWA, ONT., November 9, 1915.

MY DEAR SIR WILFRID LAURIER,—Your letter of the 8th instant reached me last evening, and I hasten to reply.

During the continuance of the war we intend to confine our programme to measures relating to or arising out of the war, following in that regard the course which we pursued in the special session of 1914 and in the session of 1915. We have not in contemplation or under consideration at present any measure of general policy.

Neither of the railway companies to which you allude has made any application to the Government for assistance. In case any such application should be made, it must of course receive consideration; but I should be glad to discuss it with you before coming to any conclusion.

With respect to the railway on the Lower St. Lawrence, upon which a large amount of money has been expended and which is almost completed, it appears to me that the application for aid has considerable merit, having regard to the interests of the population concerned. However, I would not allow it, if opposed, to stand in the way of an agreement upon the momentous question which we have now to decide.

Having regard, therefore, to the above facts, that we propose no general programme outside of war measures, and that I shall be willing to consult with you regarding policy to be followed with respect to the several railway matters referred to, I again repeat my proposition:—

That the term of the present Parliament be extended for one year from its legal expiration.

That the holding of a general election shall be deferred until a reasonable period, say six months, after conclusion of peace.

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If peace be not declared when the said term expires, the subject of holding an election or further extending the life of Parliament to be considered *de novo*.

By-elections not to be contested. Each side to hold the seats it now holds or held before the vacancy occurred. As the arrangement is being made to further a political truce I see no difference between cases of vacancy by death or resignation.

That in the meantime in Parliament and in the press, so far as the leaders on both sides can effect it, party warfare shall be suspended.

In view of the extreme gravity of the war situation and the fact that His Majesty the King has appealed to the nation for the largest possible number of troops, which appeal we are endeavouring now to answer by enlisting and equipping 100,000 additional men, to be probably followed by further enlistments, I strongly urge upon you the desirability of acceding to my proposition in order that we may all have our hands free to promote what for the present must be regarded as the supreme object.

Yours faithfully,

R. L. BORDEN.

The Right Honourable SIR WILFRID LAURIER, G.C.M.G.,
Ottawa, Ont.

OTTAWA, November 13, 1915.

My DEAR BORDEN,—While I have been unable to concur in your proposal of an extension of the Canadian parliamentary term until a year after the conclusion of peace, I have intimated and I repeat that your later suggestion to extend the life of the present Parliament for one year offers a basis for consideration and acceptance.

I am obliged, however, to attach more importance than you seem to do, to the question of the measures to be considered by Parliament at its next session. With reference to the railways mentioned by me, I understand you to say that no application for assistance has yet been made by any of them. That I need hardly point out to you, is no indication that there will be no such application. In affairs of this kind projects may be in the air and widely discussed before formal applications are filed; the railway situation may be such as to require legislation, even if no assistance out of the Treasury were involved. Any such legislation would be of importance, and in the absence of knowledge of what may come, all members will naturally desire to maintain freedom of action.

The very fact that whilst some measures relating to these railways are widely foreshadowed in the press, you are not in a position to make any statement concerning them, serves to confirm me in the opinion that, although at a later stage arrangements for some extension of the parliamentary term may become expedient, the time has not arrived, when any of us should be asked to come to a settled agreement on the subject. Our Parliament has yet nearly a full year to run. Why should we, at a time when great events are happening, which may change the situation, come to a conclusion to-day as to what may be done some months hence?

I may here observe that the term of the British Parliament is to expire only a few weeks hence, and no steps have yet been taken towards its prolongation.

I certainly agree with you that the war situation is of extreme gravity, and I will in the future as from the first, to the fullest extent of my ability, facilitate all necessary war measures.

In my judgment the business of Parliament should proceed as usual. It is possible that events may so shape themselves as to give us new light as to what would be the best course to take. But if when the session is approaching its end, the war is still

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on, we may then consider the advisability of extending the life of Parliament on the lines above set down.

With reference to the by-elections, it seems to me that there is a material difference between the vacancies caused by death and those that have been caused by resignation. In the case of vacancies caused by death, I would count on my friends consenting that contests be avoided by allowing each party to hold that which it has had. The other seats are in a notably different position, because the vacancies have arisen under circumstances which have naturally aroused much strong feeling. In some of the electoral districts, it may not be easy to avoid contests. At all events I do not feel as free to make an agreement in these cases as I do in the case of vacancies caused by death.

As to what should be the attitude of members of Parliament and the press on party matters, my desire all along has been that the field of party controversy be narrowed and the field of common action broadened. It would have been most agreeable to me if an understanding could have been reached some months ago that there would be no elections this year. I will be prepared, as far as my influence goes, to advise that party conflict be minimized, and that the most cordial support be given to the Government in the prosecution of Canada's part in the war.

Neither in Parliament nor in the press can we expect nor should we desire the suppression of all discussion. Even in the Mother Country, where there is a degree of unity between party leaders, that is most gratifying, there is still much freedom of discussion. The Canadian Parliament cannot be expected to abdicate its functions.

There will naturally be inquiry into matters of public interest, that being one of the chief purposes for which Parliament exists. But I feel assured that it will be quite possible for Parliament to exercise its proper functions in this respect, without in any way restricting the Government's freedom of action, in that which we must all agree is to-day our paramount duty, viz., to see that Canada puts forth every possible effort for the prosecution of the war to a triumphant conclusion.

Yours very sincerely,

WILFRID LAURIER.

The Right Honourable Sir ROBERT LAIRD BORDEN, P.C., G.C.M.G.,
Prime Minister's Office,
Ottawa.

OTTAWA, Ont., November 13, 1915.

DEAR SIR WILFRID LAURIER,—Your letter of the 13th instant reaches me on the eve of my departure for Halifax to attend the funeral of Sir Charles Tupper.

I observe with regret your conclusion that the time has not arrived when a settled agreement should be reached on the subject discussed at our interviews and in our correspondence. The acceptance of my proposals involves, as I have said:—

1. The extension of the term of the present Parliament for one year.
2. The avoidance of a general election during the war.
3. An arrangement that by-elections shall not be contested—each party holding the seats which it previously held.
4. The suspension of party warfare while the Empire is engaged in a struggle which threatens its existence.

I desire to repeat and emphasize the considerations which were expressed in my letter of the 9th instant.

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Respecting your reference to the British Parliament, I would observe that the Parliament of Canada has not the power to prolong its term. That purpose can only be carried into effect by legislation of the British Parliament, based upon resolutions passed by the Canadian Senate and House of Commons. This would involve considerable delay, and for this reason a decision must be reached at a correspondingly earlier date. We have no assurance that the British Parliament may not prorogue before the conclusion of our next session.

With the possibility of an impending general election the approaching session of the present Parliament would inevitably develop warm party controversy. The responsibilities imposed upon the Government by this war are of an extremely arduous nature and demand the most earnest and unremitting attention from day to day. You cannot fail to realize that in the discharge of these responsibilities which must include every possible provision and safeguard for the gallant men who have gone and who are yet to go to the front, it would be both unfortunate and deplorable that the energies of any Government should be distracted by the possible imminence of a general election and all that it would involve.

The supreme purpose is the attainment of an honourable and lasting peace through the victory of the allied nations. What may afterwards happen in respect of the fortunes of any political party is in comparison of little moment.

For these reasons I must repeat my regret at the conclusion which you announce.

Yours faithfully,

R. L. BORDEN.

The Right Honourable Sir WILFRID LAURIER, P.C., G.C.M.G.,
Ottawa, Ont.

OTTAWA, Ont., December 30, 1916.

DEAR SIR WILFRID LAURIER,—The correspondence which took place between us last year respecting the extension of the parliamentary term was not made public at the time. This was due to your desire expressed in your first letter that its publication should be withheld, although you agreed that it must eventually be made public. I feel that the time for publication has now arrived, but before taking that course I think it proper to bring the subject to your attention in order that I may have the benefit of any observations which you may desire to make.

Believe me,

Yours faithfully,

R. L. BORDEN.

The Right Honourable Sir WILFRID LAURIER, P.C., G.C.M.G.,
Ottawa.

OTTAWA, January 3, 1917.

DEAR SIR ROBERT BORDEN,—In answer to yours of the 30th of December, I see no objection to the publication of the correspondence exchanged between us last year on the subject of the extension of Parliament.

Believe me ever,

Yours very sincerely,

WILFRID LAURIER.

Right Honourable Sir ROBERT L. BORDEN, P.C., G.C.M.G., M.P.,
Ottawa.

